

Martial Arts of the Middle Ages:

The Longsword

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1. Introduction

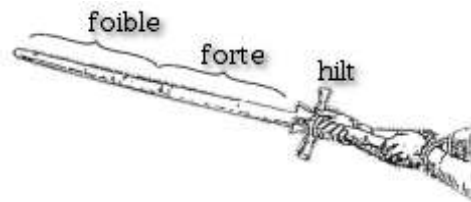
The following materials describe basics of the “Liechtenauer” system predominant in German sources of the 1400s-1500s. Johannes Liechtenauer was a famous combat master of the 1300s whose verses on combat remained central to German martial arts for centuries afterwards. The verses are difficult to interpret, but the techniques are explained in a variety of later writings, of which the most important are the “Starhemberg” manuscript of 1452, Hans Lecküchner’s *Langes Messer* (falchion) treatise of 1482, Paulus Hector Mair’s *Ars Athletica* of c. 1550, and Joachim Meyer’s *Art of Combat*, surviving in a manuscript draft of c. 1560 and an expanded printed version of 1570.

2. The Weapon



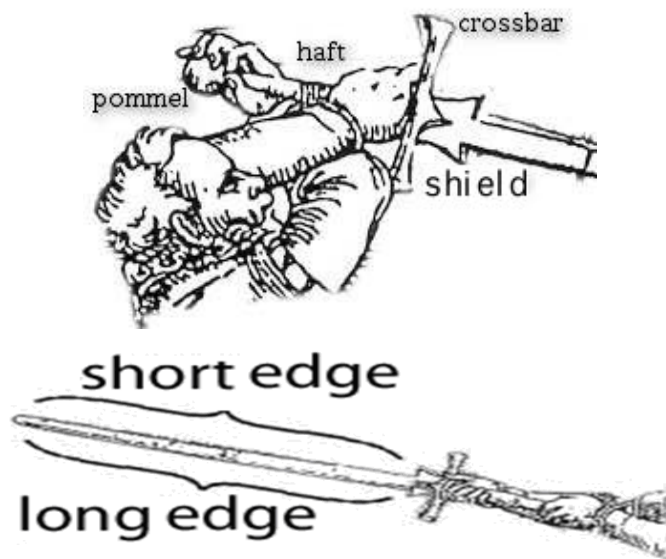
A German longsword of c. 1400 (Higgins Armory Museum 1996.02.1)

The longsword, also called the bastard sword or hand-and-a-half sword, was chiefly used in the 1300s and 1400s, but survived as a sport weapon into the 1700s. Surviving examples typically have a blade about 40" long, and a grip of about 10", and weigh around 3-5 lbs. Specialized sport versions were designed to flex like modern fencing weapons.



The forte (French for “strong”) has powerful leverage, and is used for defense and controlling the opponent’s weapon. The foible (“weak”) has little leverage, but travels more quickly than any other part of the blade, and is used for attacking.

The two-hand grip of the longsword added some power to the weapon’s attack, but more importantly it allowed greater blade control, as well as making it possible to deliver full-strength cuts simply from the actions of the two hands working in concert.



The long edge attacks with more reach and power; the short edge allows angled attacks that can get around the opponent’s defenses. They are also called the “true” edge and “false” edge.

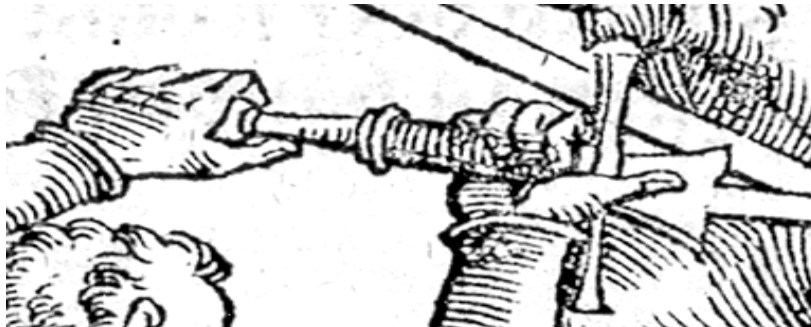
3. Grips

Fist grip



The fist grip holds the weapon with the main hand next to the crossguard closed as a fist. It is optimized for long and powerful cuts.

Thumb grip



The thumb grip slips the thumb over the crossguard onto the shield of the weapon. It is optimized for speed, maneuverability, and thrusting.

4. Guards and Straight Cuts

Guards serve as positions of readiness when out of range, and as waypoints and decision points in the course of an encounter. The tables on the following pages illustrate some of the chief guards as waypoints in the straight cuts. Note that the illustrations show variants of the guards based on specific tactical situations, not necessarily the “official” form in which they are taught.

Ox and Plow are the two chief positions of readiness; moving back and forth between them, and from one side to another, is called *winding*.

Ox (Ochs)



Ox on the right and left sides. In the default position for Ox the crossbars are horizontal. The Ox is a versatile guard that protects the head, and while threatening a thrust or almost any cut. It is the end point of the Thwart and Squinter Cuts.

Plow (Pflug)



Plow on the left and right sides. This position protects the side of the body, and can threaten a thrust or cut from below.

The Four Straight Cuts and their Guards

Scalp Cut (Scheitelhaw)



High (or Day, vom Tag)



Longpoint (Langort)



Fool (Alber)

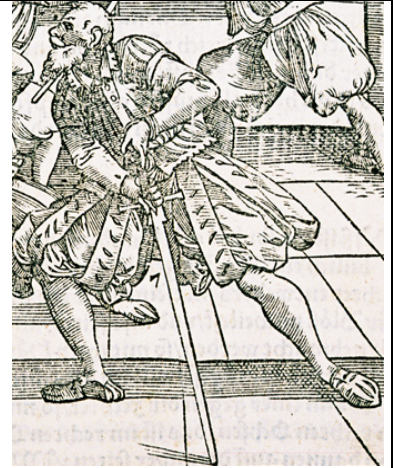
Wrath Cut (*Zornhaw*)



Wrath Guard (*Zornhut*)



Longpoint (*Langort*)



Change (*Wechsel*)

Middle Cut (*Mittelhaw*)



Middle Guard on the left
(*Mittelhut*) [Note that the cut is
shown here going from L to R]



Longpoint (*Langort*)



Middle Guard on the right

Low Cut (Unterhaw)



Side Guard (*Nebenhut*)



Hanging Point (*Hangetort*)



Unicorn (*Einhorn*)

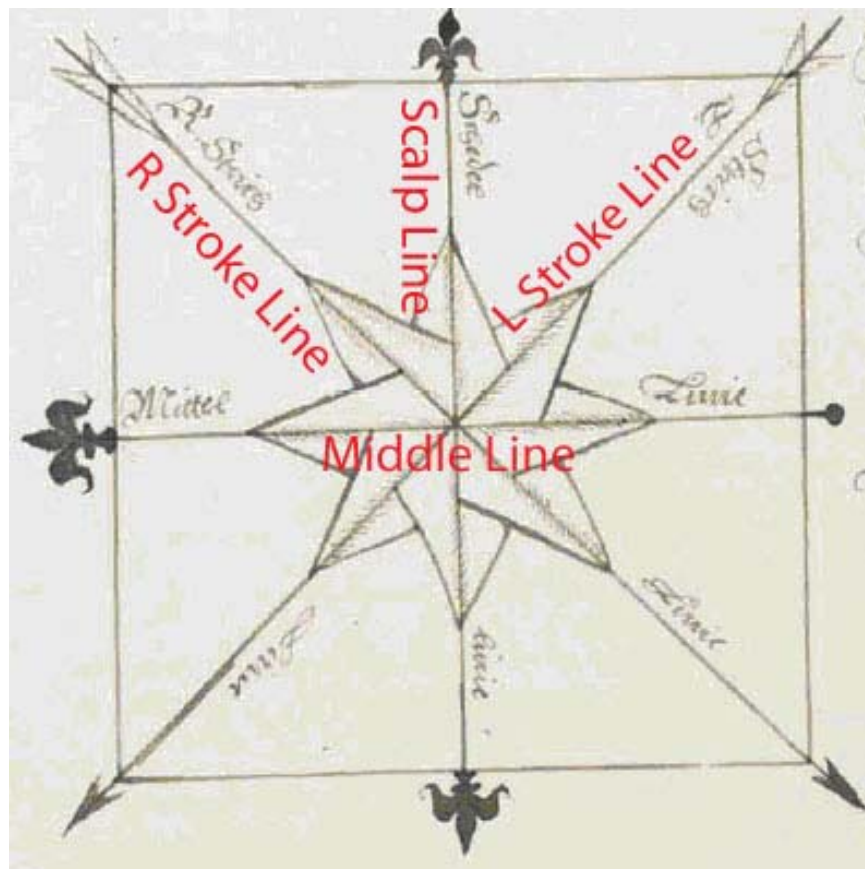


Diagram of the cutting lines from the Meyer manuscript of 1560.

The Wrath and Low Cuts pass through the Stroke Lines.

5. The Targets

The opponent's target area is divided into 4 quarters along lines down the center of the body and across the armpits. (The horizontal line through the head is an additional subdivision, not important here.)



6. Stepping

Passing Step

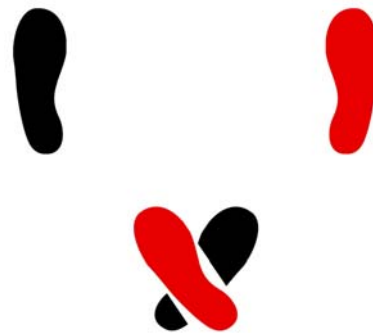
Stand with your left foot forward and your right foot back; the left foot points forward, the right foot angles out. Step forward with your right foot so that it is now in front, pivoting your left foot so that it is now angling out. This is a pass forward on the right foot.



From black to red is a pass forward on the right foot

Triangle Step

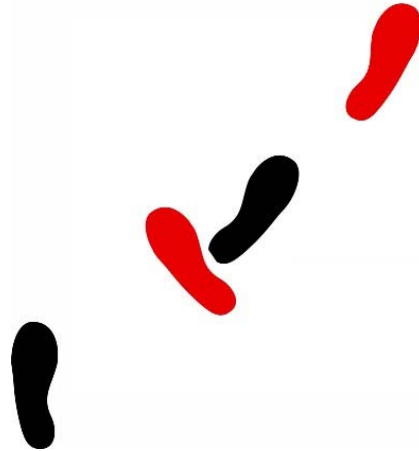
Stand with your left foot forward and your right foot back; the left foot points forward, the right foot angles out. Step forward and to the right with your right foot so that it is even with your left foot, and step back with your left foot so that your feet are now in mirror position from where they started. This is a triangle step on the right foot.



From black to red is a triangle step on the R foot; from red to black is a triangle step on the L foot

Gather Step

Stand with your right foot forward and your left foot back. Gather your rear foot toward your forward foot, then step forward on the forward foot to come back into your initial stance. This is a gather step on the right foot.



From black to red is a gather step on the right

Back Step

Stand with your right foot forward and your left foot back. Step with your left foot backwards behind your right. This is a back-step on the left foot.



From red to black is a back-step on the L foot

7. Techniques from Armored Combat

Halfsword Guards



The Low and High Guards at Halfsword. The same guards are also used in unarmored combat.

Murder-Blow (Mortschlag)



The figure on the left is delivering the Murder-Blow. This is easiest to set up by starting in a halfsword guard.

8. Basic Drills

8.1 Improvised Katas

Practice randomly running through all the techniques you know (guards, cuts, etc.). Use this document to remind yourself of your repertoire of techniques. This drill can be done solo, or in pairs or groups, with people taking turns leading. It is an excellent warmup drill.

Simple version: Use only passing steps or only triangle steps

Advanced version: Mix up the stepping; you can also choose to cut through or end the cuts in Longpoint

8.2 The Straight Cuts Drill [Meyer 1570]

Start in Fool with your right foot back.

Lift your sword into High Guard, passing through Hanging Point with crossed hands, blade to the left, as you bring the sword up.

Deliver a Scalp Cut, passing forward on your right foot, ending in Fool.

Lift your sword into High Guard, passing through Hanging Point with uncrossed hands, blade to the right, as you bring the sword up.

Deliver a Scalp Cut, passing forward on your left foot, ending in Fool.

Repeat this an equal number of times on the right and left sides, then do it stepping backwards on each cut.

Repeat delivering Wrath, Middle, and Low Cuts. Start each series from the position where the cut ends, as you began the Scalp Cut series from Fool. Both forward and backwards, the cut will come from the side that starts with the foot back.

Variants:

1. End the cuts in Longpoint
2. Do the drill with triangle steps
3. Deliver a different cut each time

4. Randomize the forward and backward stepping, also throwing in triangle steps
5. Mix up these variants

Paired version: Attacker ends the cuts in Longpoint, defender catches the cuts by winding into Ox or Plow—catch Scalp and Wrath Cuts with Ox, catch Middle and Low Cuts with Plow.

8.3 The Two and Four Quarters Drill [Meyer 1570]

Two Quarters—Solo Version

Start in Longpoint with your right foot back (you are out of range of the opponent at this stage).

1. Let your blade drop to your left side, and bring it around to deliver a right Wrath Cut, passing forward on your right foot, and ending in Longpoint. (The passing step brings you into range.)
2. Deliver a left Low Cut, doing a triangle step on your left foot, ending in Hanging Point. (The triangle step moves you around the opponent while maintaining distance.)

Deliver a right Wrath Cut, passing back on your left foot, cutting all the way through to Change, and recover to Ox. (This is called *cutting away*, and serves to protect you as you move out of range.)

Variants:

1. Start the cuts in all four quarters of the opponent; each time, the second cut comes diagonally opposite the first. The basic version is R Wrath, L Low, so add R Low, L Wrath; L Wrath, R Low; L Low, R Wrath. You will need to alter the footwork accordingly.
2. Randomize where you deliver the first cut.
3. Cut all the way through with the first two cuts.
4. Start from Ox instead of Longpoint

Two Quarters—Paired Version

The attacker does the same as in the solo version. The defending sequence is as follows:

Start in right Plow.

1. Triangle-step on the right foot, winding up into left Ox to catch the cut.
2. Triangle-step on the left foot, winding down into right Plow.

You can cut away when the attacker cuts away.

Similar defenses can be used against the variant attack sequences. Each time, the defender triangle-steps away from the cut, catching it by winding into Ox for Wrath Cuts, Plow for Low Cuts.

Four Quarters—Solo Version

Instead of doing just 2 cuts, the attacker delivers a cut to all 4 quarters of the opponent, as follows:

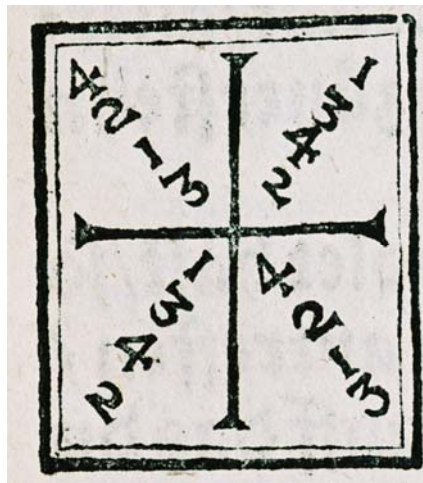
Start out of range in Longpoint with your right foot back.

1. Deliver a right Wrath Cut, passing forward on your right foot.
2. Deliver a left Low Cut, triangle-stepping on your left foot.
3. Deliver a right Low Cut, triangle-stepping on your right foot.
4. Deliver a left Wrath Cut, triangle-stepping on your left foot.

Cut away with a Wrath Cut, passing back on your left foot, and recover to Ox.

Variants:

1. Repeat this pattern beginning in a different quarter (following the numbers as in this diagram).



In the first sequence, the initial attack is from the upper right quarter (the outermost “1” above), then lower left (2), lower right (3), upper left (4). The second series begins with 1 in the lower right, 2 in the upper left, and so on.

2. Cut all the way through with the cuts.
3. Deliver the attacks as Thwart Cuts

Four Quarters—Paired Version

The attacker does the same as in the solo version. The defending sequence is as follows:

Start in right Plow.

1. Triangle-step on the right foot, winding up into left Ox to catch the cut.
2. Triangle-step on the left foot, winding down into right Plow.
3. Triangle-step on the right foot, winding across into left Plow.
4. Triangle-step on the left foot, winding up into right Ox.

You can cut away as the attacker cuts away.

Similar sequences of defenses can be used against each pattern of attacks.

9. The Five Master Cuts

Wrath Cut (*Zornhaw*)

Described in Section 4. The Wrath Cut is the simplest and most powerful cut, and can also be used as a defense against most cuts.

Scalp Cut (*Scheitelhaw*)

Described in Section 4. The Scalper is a very quick and long cut that goes straight for the head. It is the classic response to an opponent in Fool.

Thwart Cut (*Zwerchhaw*)

Start in right Ox and helicopter your blade around your head to end up in left Ox; repeat in the other direction. This is a pair of Thwart Cuts. The Thwart Cut protects the head while threatening the opponent; it is the classic response to an opponent in High Guard.

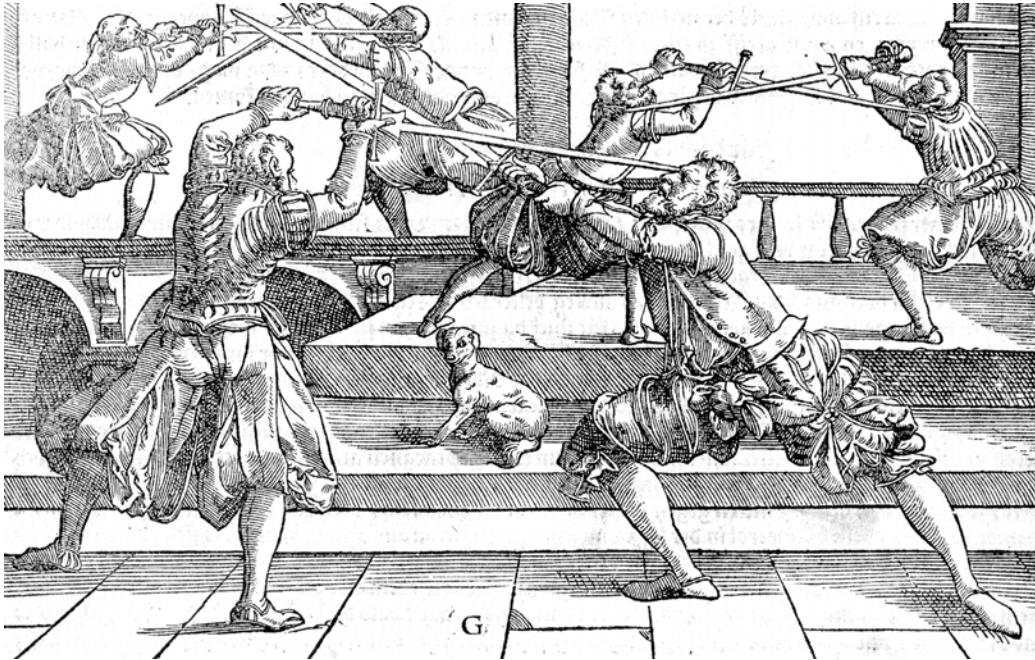


The figure on the R is executing a Thwart Cut against a High Cut.

Squinting Cut (*Schielhaw*)

Start in Ox; come up into High Guard as for a Scalp Cut, but as the blade reaches vertical, flip it around to lead the cut with the short edge. The final position of the cut will be Ox on the

opposite side (depending on the tactical situation, the hands can drop down into Plow). The Squinting Cut threatens the opponent while protecting one side of the body; it is the classic response to an opponent in Plow.



The large figure on the L is executing a Squinting Cut against a High Cut

Crooked Cut (*Krumphaw*)

Start in Crossed Guard; flip the blade across in front of you propeller-wise to Crossed Guard on the opposite side, stepping with the cut.



Crossed Guard; it should be done with the thumb grip.

This is the most defensive cut, as it clears the space between the combatants, but it does not defend and attack at the same time, unless it is used against the opponent's arms. It is the classic response to an opponent in Ox.



The figure on the R is executing a Crooked Cut against a Middle or Low Cut.

9.1 The Master Cuts Drill

Do each Master Cut forward and back as in the Straight Cuts drill (Section 8.2). Variants 2-5 will also work.

10. Sample Encounter: The Double-Thwart [Meyer 26r]

A	B
Start in Fool	Start in right Change
Come up into High for a Scalp Cut	Sweep up to the left to set up a Thwart
Deliver Scalp Cut, passing forward on the R foot	Deliver a Thwart from the R, with a R triangle step
To protect against the Thwart, the Scalper will have to fall on the middle of B's blade. B now has the initiative, so A will act in response to B's actions in the rest of the encounter.	Ideally, pull the Thwart before contact.
Block B's Thwart with a L triangle step	Deliver a Thwart from the L with a left triangle step
	Wrench A's blade to your R
Block B's Thwart, stepping toward the L if possible	Deliver another Thwart from the L ¹ . The stepping for the wrench and Thwart can be either a gather step or back-step toward the L
Cut away	Open the distance with a Middle Cut from the R, passing back on the L foot
	Cut away

¹ Meyer actually calls for a short-edge cut with crossed arms. The L Thwart has crossed arms, but is done with the long edge.

11. Selected Sources

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